

LIFE AFTER IRAQ

>> BILLY BRIGGS AND ANGELA CATLIN



Iraqi family in Refugee Camp in Damascus, Syria, Angela Catlin, photographer. 2008

In January, 2008, I embarked on a major journalistic project with photographer Angela Catlin to document the stories of some of the estimated 4.7 million Iraqi refugees who had been displaced following the US-led invasion of the country in 2003. While much had been written by the British press about the conflict, the refugee crisis had been largely ignored so we felt there was an urgent need to redress the balance and to highlight an escalating problem at a time when media attention was shifting to Afghanistan.

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq was the worst in the Middle East since Palestinians were displaced in 1948. Some 2.2 million people had left their homeland for sanctuary moving to the safety of neighbours such as Egypt, Jordan and Syria, while thousands of others fled to Europe to seek political asylum in nations such as, among others, Britain, France, Germany and Sweden.

Our project was carried out in conjunction with the Scottish Refugee Council, a non-governmental organisation that offers support to asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Scotland. Firstly, we travelled to Damascus, the capital of Syria, where we spent 10 days interviewing some of the estimated 1.5 million refugees who were living there. We then spent several weeks meeting Iraqis who had moved to Scotland and a year later we interviewed dozens of refugees living in Wales in conjunction with a organisation called the Welsh Refugee Council.

Some of the stories we heard from refugees were truly horrific and I owe them a great debt of gratitude for their participation in our project. To document the impact of war on their lives, I wrote a series of articles in the press and Angela's stunning photographs were shown in exhibitions held in Glasgow, Scotland, and later in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and Wrexham in Wales. The words that follow provide a snapshot of the refugee crisis at its peak and an insight into the legacy of an illegal war that ruined the lives of millions of people. Life After Iraq continues as a project.

DAMASCUS, SYRIA. MARCH 2008.

NASHWAN HADDAD'S hand shakes as he lights a cigarette. The 58-year-old is distraught and breaks down as he shows me the ID card that belonged to his son. From a passport sized photo a young boy's face stares back at me. The image is of Moyad Nashwan, an Iraqi teenager wearing a blue and white striped shirt. Moyad was the first-born and only son of, Nashwan, and his wife, Roula, who stands beside her husband with her hands clasped in front of her. She is wearing a black abiya (correct), as does her 12-year-old daughter, Dhikra, who sits with her head bowed as her father speaks.

On March 22nd, 2007, Moyad was playing in a Baghdad street with a friend when both boys were kidnapped by gunmen. A Shiah Muslim family living in a predominantly Sunni area of the Iraqi capital, they'd already been threatened several times, Nashwan explains. That evening he received a telephone call at his home. "He (the caller) said he was with Islamic Jihad and accused me of being a leader of a Shiah militia. I said this wasn't true and pleaded with him to take me instead of Moyad," Nashwan says, crying and unable to finish the story.

Roula leans forward and places her hand on her husband's shoulder. There was no demand of a ransom from the kidnappers, she continues, or any kind of negotiation, only a cold-blooded message that Moyad would be executed. The boy's 'crime' was to be a Shiah Muslim. The next day Nashwan took another call and was told by Islamic Jihad where his 15-year-old son's body had been dumped.

For a moment there is silence in the room, then our translator stands and embraces Roula. In a corner of the room an Arabic television channel broadcasts news about the unending violence in the homeland this family fled for the safety of Syria. Nashwan composes himself and gestures towards the television screen. "Yesterday they killed an archbishop. They are killing children. To kill children, is this Jihad?" he says angrily.

Five years on from the US-led invasion, the killing continues in Iraq. On the flight to Syria the day before, I'd read about the body of Paulos Faraj Rahho, the Catholic Archbishop of Iraq's largest Christian community, being found in a shallow grave north of Mosul. The Pope led the condemnation of the holy man's murder while the newspaper reported on another day of horrors in Iraq; a car bomb that killed 18 people in Baghdad; US officials having been sent the severed fingers of five kidnapped employees of a security firm.

As refugees here in Damascus, the Syrian capital, Nashwan, Roula and Dhikra, know all too well of the mayhem. It's a conflict that President George Bush claimed earlier this month to be an "undeniable success". At this juncture, there are some five million refugees who would beg to differ with Mr Bush's analysis. Iraq is haemorrhaging and the world's fastest growing refugee crisis could be about to get even worse.

GLASGOW, SCOTLAND. APRIL, 2008.

HUSSEIN YOUSEF keeps in touch with Nashwan and Roula by telephone. In fact, he has little choice but to use a mobile phone to stay in contact with relatives. "We have family as refugees in London, Malmo, Damascus and Baghdad," the 57-year-old says. We are in Hussein's home in Blackhill, Glasgow. His wife, Maida, offers us some Arabic tea while a muted television set has Al Jazeera broadcasting graphic images of the carnage from the latest suicide attack in Baghdad. Hussein sips from a glass cup and nods his head towards the screen. "Moyad was shot dead. Two of Nashwan's cousins were killed, both beheaded – one of them was kidnapped driving on the road from Baghdad to Damascus. His (Nashwan's) sister was also in Damascus as a refugee but was kidnapped by a Lebanese criminal gang. She was freed but so terrified afterwards she decided it would be safer in Baghdad," he says.

Hussein explains that his brother is married to Nashwan's sister; both refugees living in London. Hussein came to Scotland with his family in May, 2002, after his brother, Kasim, walked out on a job at Saddam

Hussein's palace in Baghdad. Fellow employees had been hanged or shot for making the simplest of errors and Kasim could not live under the Sword of Damocles anymore.

His brother left the palace and went into exile, but his desertion meant the lives of his family were also under threat so Hussein left Iraq for Britain. Since leaving he has not seen any of his relatives, including his elderly mother who's still in Baghdad. He has two sisters in the city, both Shia Muslims who have had to leave their homes in Sunni areas because of the sectarian killings, now refugees in their own country. "I phoned them two weeks ago and there was heavy fighting. The whole family was hiding under stairs," Hussein says. Maida has a sister who is a refugee in Malmo, Sweden, and she tells us that both her mother and father – whom she had not seen since coming to the UK – died recently in Iraq. "I used to live about three miles from Nashwan and Roula in Baghdad. Our family would visit each other on a weekly basis, usually on a Friday. I don't suppose that will ever happen again," Maida says. Hussein laughs. "It could happen sooner than we think," he says. Six years after coming to the UK, Hussein and Maida have not had their appeal for asylum granted. If rejected, they will be faced with the stark choice of homelessness or a return to Iraq.

Urgent aid is required for Iraqi refugees. That was the message in March, 2008, from the refugee agency UNHCR. "Without this, the humanitarian crisis we have faced over the past two years may grow even larger," said UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, appealing for £65m.

Soaring global food and fuel prices – the former up 83% in the past three years according to the World Bank – were exacerbating a dire situation as refugees were running out of savings. At that time, UNHCR fed 150,000 refugees daily in Damascus, compared with 33,000 people in September, 2007. There were 1.5 million refugees in Syria and more arrived each week. Staff at UNHCR's registration centre told us they processed up to 130 new families each day.

The influx placed tremendous strain on services and rents across the Syrian capital were rising rapidly. Nashwan and Roula were only able to pay their monthly rent of 10,000 Syrian pounds (£100) with financial help from Nashwan's sister in London. "My savings are gone, we only get food from the UN and are not permitted to work. It is not safe to go back to Baghdad – what are we supposed to do?" Nashwan says.

If you were to believe the US government at that point then it was safe to return to Iraq. Shortly before Christmas, 2007, a much-trumpeted bus convoy was organised from Damascus to Baghdad, carrying 800 Iraqis home as a propaganda exercise designed to show that peace was being restored. But in April, 2008, a survey published by UNHCR said that 89.5% of refugees were not planning on returning. Baghdad, Karkh, al-Anbar, Rasafa, Adhamaiya, Kadhimihay, Sadr City, Diyala and Ninawa, were all places said to be too dangerous. Of the 4% of refugees intending to go back, 26% were returning because their money had run out.

UNHCR's findings chimed with our own experience in Damascus. Of the dozens of refugees we interview not one person said they could return. Moreover, the majority of interviewees – clearly traumatised by their experiences – say they would never go back. These included; Falah Hassan, whose daughter, Neigal, died in a bomb blast in Najaf in June 2005; Zeinab, whose 16-year-old daughter, Zahraa, was raped in front of her and then abducted; Ahmed, a refugee who works with Clowns Without Borders at UNHCR reception centre and who left Iraq after colleagues from his troupe were murdered.

The situation for civilians in many parts of Iraq was horrendous and in stark contrast to what was portrayed by both the US and British governments. While President Bush was waxing lyrical about the war in March, 2008, the British Foreign Secretary, David Miliband MP, said it had been a "remarkable victory". "It is striking that the number of attacks are down," he added, despite the fact that Iraqi government statistics showed that civilian deaths had more than doubled

from 460 in January, 2008, to 947 in February, 2008.

Both governments had been strongly criticised at that time for their attitudes towards Iraqi refugees. With the former, it was a scathing attack by Anastasia K Brown, director of the US Bishops' Refugee Programme in the US, who described her government's response to the refugee crisis as "shockingly inadequate". While UNHCR had referred 24,000 vulnerable cases for resettlement, she said, only 4000 have entered the country. Ms Brown pointed out that 135,000 Vietnamese refugees had been resettled in one year at the end of the Vietnam War, while in a six-month period in 1999, 14,000 Kosovars were accepted. But the US government said it remained committed to resettling more refugees and a target of 12,000 had been set for the end of September, 2008.

In the UK, the Home Office was still refusing the majority of applications from Iraqis for asylum. According to the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC), of the 1355 Iraqis who applied for asylum in the UK in 2007, around 80 per cent were refused first time. By comparison, in both Sweden and Germany, more than 80 per cent of those who applied were approved. In a scathing report the Independent Asylum Commission said the treatment of asylum seekers in the UK fell "seriously below" the standards of a civilised society. Despite this figures published in April, 2008, showed that for the period January to March 2008, the number of Iraqi asylum applications to UK was up 122 per cent on the previous quarter to 700.

It also emerged that more than 1400 rejected Iraqi asylum seekers would be told they must go home. Before they left, however, they would be asked to sign a waiver agreeing the UK government would take no responsibility for what happened to them once they returned. A spokesman for the Home Office, said that the government did not accept that it was unsafe for Iraqis to return home. "Over 3300 Iraqis left voluntarily between 2000 and 2007," a spokesman said.

But given the government's active role in Iraq, said John Wilkes, chief executive of SRC, it had a

responsibility to take more asylum seekers and to stop returning Iraqis to a country which was “blatantly unsafe”. “When the international community is calling on Iraq’s neighbours to keep their borders open to refugees, the UK is responding by making it increasingly difficult for refugees to claim asylum. In Britain, there is a growing number of Iraqis who have been refused, but as a result of the continued violence in Iraq, are unable to return home. They are being forced into destitution. In a snapshot survey of destitute asylum seekers in Glasgow we carried in 2006, Iraqis were the largest group.”

While Syria had granted Nashwan and his family refugee status from a British-backed war, the UK government said it was safe to return people to Iraq, and would decide on Hussein’s fate soon. Hussein wants to work as a carpenter again but if his application for asylum is rejected he faces losing state support and homelessness, or a return to Iraq. Nashwan had no money left and if UNHCR stopped providing aid then he also faced a very bleak future.

The first anniversary of Moyad’s death was two days after the fifth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq. Nashwan and Roula initially welcomed American soldiers and invited them into their home, but the situation deteriorated when the Jihadists arrived in their country. “We did not have Al Qaeda in Iraq before. What has the US created?” Nashwan said. Whatever your opinion is on the rights and wrongs of the US invasion of Iraq, it has been catastrophic for Iraq’s five million refugees.

CARDIFF, WALES. FEBRUARY, 2008.

A US security checkpoint in Baghdad saved Rasha Aldawodi’s life. It was 24 May, 2007, a date seared into the 26-year-old’s consciousness. She was travelling home from work in an Iraqi government car when it was stopped by American soldiers. Rasha was usually home from the Green Zone by 4.30pm but that day she was late because of the extensive search of the vehicle carried out by troops. That delay prevented her being murdered but the young Iraqi woman’s life would never

be the same again. Speaking at a hostel for asylum seekers in Cardiff, she is candid about the tragedy that befell her family.

“When I got to my house there were police outside and I knew right away that something terrible had happened,” Rasha says.

Her parents had both been shot dead by the Medhi Army. Their crime was to have a daughter who worked in the Iraqi Parliament in Baghdad’s international zone. Rasha was the target of the militia’s killers but she is certain that her father, Kamal, and mother, Fozia, would still have died if she’d arrived home at her normal time that day.

A business student studying for a masters at Baghdad University, Rasha was employed in the administration department of the parliament so she juggled studies with full-time employment. Working in the international zone made her a target for the Medhi Army because she would have been viewed as collaborator with the US and Britain.

“My family was never interested in sectarian issues or politics. My dad imported car parts. He was a Sunni Muslim while my mother was a Shiah but it made no difference to them. None of us got involved in politics,” she says.

Rasha is a strong woman but is still grieving for her parents and the life that was mercilessly taken from her. She lost everything. She never entered the family home again in the Zyona area of Baghdad and on the night of her parents’ murders she was taken in by a kind and brave neighbour. Rasha’s life was still in mortal danger, though, so she had no choice but to leave Iraq immediately. Her neighbour went back to Rasha’s home and gathered money, clothes and a passport and Rasha, traumatised, flew in shock to Jordan the next day leaving everything she’d ever known behind.

From Jordan she took a flight to Heathrow in London and is now a refugee in Wales.

The Welsh Refugee Council agreed with the SRC and said the government still has a responsibility to take more asylum seekers and to stop returning Iraqis

to a country which is unsafe. Kate Smart, Director of Policy, Communications and Advocacy with the WRC, said that Wales was proud of the welcome it had shown to Iraqis who have required a place of safety during the years of Saddam Hussein's rule and since the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

"With the withdrawal of British troops it would be easy to forget about the continued dangers to civilians in Iraq, or to assume that problems have been resolved and the refugee crisis is ended," she said.

"It would be wrong to do so; two separate explosions killed a number of civilians recently, and a Welsh security guard was killed in Iraq not long ago.

"Iraq is still not a safe and stable country and WRC believes that Iraqis who have been refused asylum and are sleeping rough because they are afraid to return, should be granted leave to remain in Wales."

In Wales, Iraqi refugees are dispersed to Cardiff, Swansea, Wrexham and Newport. A recent survey of destitute people visiting the WRC found that of those who'd been destitute for more than six months, Iraqis were the most common group.

WRC said that the Welsh Assembly Government has a sympathetic and inclusive approach to asylum seekers with a progressive agenda through its Refugee Inclusion Strategy. Smart added that Wales has been richly repaid by the skills and culture the Iraqis have brought to communities.

Rasha was granted refugee status shortly after arriving in Britain and has now settled in Cardiff. "When I first came it was awful as I had no control over my life and had no idea what would happen to me. I cried and cried all the time. Even now I am only beginning to start the grieving process for my parents," she says.

Rasha has a sister still in Baghdad and Iraqi friends living as refugees in places such as Jordan and Syria. She keeps in contact with them all but has no idea whether she will see them again. She says she can never return to Iraq.

Slowly, however, Rasha is rebuilding her life.

She now works for Cardiff City Council at a hostel in the city for asylum seekers and is planning to study accountancy part-time at college later this year. She has also met her future husband, Colin, and is now engaged.

She added: "The people of Wales have been very supportive and I'm so grateful that I've been given the chance of a new life."

MARCH, 2010.

The Iraq refugee crisis is improving but UNHCR says there are still 1.7 million refugees in the Middle East with another 1.7 million people internally displaced. In 2009, asylum claims in industrialised countries by Iraqi asylum seekers dropped 40 percent over the previous year. However, Iraqis still lodged asylum applications in 39 out of the 44 industrialized countries and the refugee agency said there were still major concerns with regards to Iraq. Peter Kessler, of UNHCR in London said: "The security situation has improved, but remains volatile and unpredictable. There are still many security incidents and civilian deaths still reach several hundred per month. While the number of Iraqi asylum applicants in Europe has been decreasing, it is still significant. The figure for 2009 is 24,000.



*Iraqi woman in Refugee Camp in Damascus Syria,
Angela Catlin, photographer, 2008*